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ABSTRACT

While the term "intersubjectivity" has become widely used to mean something like "shared experience," it is, paradoxically, poorly understood. This review of the theoretical foundations of intersubjectivity argues that the problem lies in the developmental starting points of the theories. Either subjective experiences are seen to develop before communal ones, as in Schutz (1967), or vice versa, as in Mead (1934). It is asserted that the polarity of these positions works against the understanding of the processes of intersubjectivity. Evidence from research on infants is used to suggest a new starting point that acknowledges both shared and private experience. (Author/RH)

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Between Subjects:
Shared Meanings of Intersubjectivity

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Abstract

While the term "intersubjectivity" has become widely used to mean something like "shared experience", paradoxically it is poorly understood. Reviewing the theoretical foundations of the term, I argue that the problem lies in the developmental starting points of the theories. Either subjective experiences are seen to develop before communal ones or the reverse. The polarity of these positions works against our understanding of the processes of intersubjectivity. Evidence from infant research is used to suggests a new starting point that acknowledges both shared and private experience.

While it is perhaps obscure jargon to some and a new catch word to others, the word "intersubjectivity" has already acquired a superabundance of meanings. This term is used either as a noun, meaning shared experiences (as in, the process of intersubjectivity), or as a redundant adjective, meaning shared or common (as in, intersubjective understanding). But there is paradoxically little agreement in the use of the term. For example, studying mother-infant interactions, (Trevarthan, 1979, p.347) defines "intersubjectivity" as the "process by which conscious intending subjects relate their mental and emotional processes together." Stolorow, Branchaft, and Atwood (1987, p.7) describe psychoanalytic understanding as an intersubjective process of "prereflectively unconscious" dialogue between two personal universes, comprising "a series of empathic inferences into the structure of an individual's subjective life, alternating and interacting with the analyst's acts of reflection upon the involvement of his own personal reality in the ongoing investigation."

Now it may sound like this is just relabeling familiar themes like reciprocity, mutuality, cooperation, empathy, or countertransference; however, I hope through a brief recourse to the foundations of this term to show the importance of what is at issue. What I believe this new terminology does is to put into question what the familiar terms lull us to believe is already clear. What is it to share meaning, cooperate, or be empathic? What makes these experiences possible or impossible for us? The answers to these questions lie at the intersection of our theories of self, society, language, and rationality.

We could locate our problem of understanding the word "intersubjectivity" in the difficulty of clarifying what "subjectivity" means, but this is not a good starting point (Cumming, 1979) for reasons that I hope will become clear. Rather, I would like to suggest that the prefix "inter" should be the focus of our inquiry. This familiar prefix comes from latin where it holds such <u>spacial</u> meanings as between, among, or in the midst of (as in interface); such <u>temporal</u> meanings as during (as in interminable); and such <u>relational</u> meanings as mutual, reciprocal, or together (as in interplay).

Say we just focus in on the simplest case: the preposition "between". We can then define "inter-subjectivity" as "between two subjectivities" or "between two subjects". But this leads us directly back

into the mire because "between" is defined as 1) linking or connecting the space separating two objects, 2) intermediate to in time, quantity, or degree 3) by common action or participation, or 4) distinguishing one from another in comparisons (Urdang & Flexner, 1969). But we are getting warmer; we can now formulate the questions to direct our inquiry. What gap in space or time separates subjects from one another? What common actions reach over this gap? What distinguishes subjects from one another?

The notion that there is a gap or differences between minds or subjectivities is referred to in philosophy as the epistemological problem of "other minds" - a problem perhaps solidified into its current formulation by Descartes (1637/1960). Descartes (1637/1960, pp.24-30), writes that few ideas are revealed to us clearly. Rather, our senses deceive us, we make mistakes in reasoning, and we are deluded by our dreams or unconscious. But even when we doubt all we know, says Descartes, we can at least be assured of our own being: I think therefore I exist. But in Descartes' method for obtaining certainty by rejecting as absolutely false anything about which we have the least doubt, we have the origins of the gap between subjects. As doubting, and therefore imperfect subjects, we are irrevocably divided from understanding each other by our inaccurate senses, our imperfect rationality, and our deceptive unconscious processes. It is not being certain of what goes on in an other's mind that wedges a gap between subjects. What is the other seeing, feeling, thinking, intending, or knowing (Shantz, 1975)?

Since Descartes, many theories have been proposed which either fortify or bridge this gap. When considering the polar extremes, these theories either assert the ontological isolation of individuals condemned to the uncertainty and freedom of their own consciousness, or they deny private experience and root common understandings in shared culture or language. Depending on whether the theory assumes that subjective experiences develop prior to communal ones or the reverse, we are either isolated by individualism or trapped by conformity.

Now, we may believe this is all nonsense - if we want to know something about an other's experience we can just ask. But recourse to the possibility of shared meaning through dialogue engenders the same doubts: What do we understand by what the other is saying; or as ex-president Nixon put it "I know you believe you

understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant".

To illustrate the nature of the problem of shared meaning in dialogue, let me describe briefly the views held by two of our founding fathers, Alfred Schutz (1967) and George Herbert Mead (1934). Schutz holds the more familiar view that private experience proceeds communal understandings. For Mead the reverse is true.

Schutz (1967, p. 106) argues that we each build up our own "stock of knowledge" or "lived experience" over the course of our lives. Experience of another necessarily takes place from the standpoint of our own experience. However, it is possible to interpret an other's use of signs or expressive acts, that is, to interpret what actually went on in the mind of the communicator, the person who uses the sign, but we must remember "everyone using or interpreting a sign associates with it a certain meaning having its origin in the unique quality of the experiences in which he once learned to use the sign" (Schutz, 1967, p. 124). Because of this origin and despite efforts on the part of both speaker and listener to understand each other, the dialogue is always plagued by vagueness and uncertainty. Indeed, according to Schutz (1967, p. 129):

> The subjective meaning that the interpreter does grasp is at best an approximation to the sign-user's intended meaning, but never that meaning itself, for one's knowledge of another person's perspective is always necessarily limited. For exactly, the same reason the person who expresses himself in signs is never quite sure of how he is being understood.

Common knowledge is compromised by private experience. My students have dubbed this the parallel lines theory. The speaker's intended meaning and listener's interpretation never meet.

A familiar developmental variant of the thesis that meanings are subjective in their origins, sees infants entering interpersonal relations with their own egocentric understandings or action schema concerning the social order of things. Sometime during the first year of life they "break out of privacy" and begin to note the contingencies between their own and others actions (Youniss, 1980, p.4). As the child's social network widens, conflicts in his or her own and other's meaning systems are encountered. These are worked out through cooperation motivated by the mutual respect afforded in peer relations. In this conflict-consensus model of the development of shared meaning,

idiosyncratic or subjective knowledge is gradually converted to rational, objective, mutually held norms or beliefs (Leadbeater, 1988, in press).

Starting from the opposite pole, Mead (1934) argues that it is impossible to conceive of a separate self arising outside of social experiences. According to Mead (1934, p. 50):

> Selves must be accounted for in terms of the social process, and in terms of communication; and individuals must be brought into essential relation within that process before communication, or the contact between the minds of different individuals becomes possible.

Describing the social processes of the development of the self, Mead (1934, p.73) says there must first be meaningful symbols which "arouse in the individual himself the response which he is calling out in the other". Symbols, as verbal gestures, are meaningful only when they call out in the self the same response that they have for another, that is, when the individual using them anticipates the response the other will have when he or she hears it. The symbol acts a stimulus to produce a certain response from the other. Hence, the individual using the symbol calls out in himself or herself the exact response she anticipates the other having. Let me give you an example.

Recall the demonstrations by Lewis and Brooks-Gunn (1979) of the development of the social self. By dabbing rouge on children's noses and placing them before a mirror, the authors report that children younger than about 16 to 18 months ignore themselves. Children older than this look in the mirror, see the rouge, touch their noses, act silly, and look embarrassed. They appear able to stand in our shoes and take the attitude towards themselves that we might take towards them. It is as if they were saying to themselves something like: "Boy, do I look silly!" They can take themselves as the object of their own reflection. They can be said to have concept of themselves - a self concept.

According to Mead (1934), there is no private thought, no consciousness, and no personality, unmeditated by meaningful social symbols (Mead, 1934, p. 159). Once developed, symbols can be used in private thinking, but because of their social origins there is no gap in inter-individual communications. Using meaningful symbols or verbal expressions, we take the perspective of a generalized other (i.e. of any other individual) in all thought or communication. But this

sociocentric theory collapses individual and cross-cultural experiences into unambiguous symbolic interactions.

So you see the problem with starting points. If you begin with the idea that the infant has private experiences before she has communal ones, it is necessary to find a way to bridge the gap between subjectivities. If you begin with common experience, you have to disregard individual-specific and culture-specific experiences. So we can endlessly travel back and forth along the path of this antinomy. Much of the research of social cognition follows this track either investigating what the other is seeing, feeling, or knowing from the perspective of the individualized thinking self (Shantz, 1975); or assessing development of the ability to take the third-person, perspective of the generalized other (Damon & Hart, 1982; Selman, 1980). Competence for empathy, consensus, or mutual understanding is generally taken for granted in adults. We seldom question whether the mature individual <u>is</u> limited in his or her ability to know or understand others, or whether the perspective of a generalized other is adequate to understanding other minds. I think these are the unanswered questions of intersubjectivity.

Once these question are addressed directly, however, developmental theory offers another starting point for understanding the processes of intersubjectivity. Let us start with the assertion that the original social position of the human infant is one of helplessness. While infant research has increasingly demonstrated the complexity of innate abilities, it is known that well-fed infants, deprived of social contact, fail to thrive (Spitz, 1965). Even some reflexive actions of infants depend on the actions of others for success. Rooting, sucking, and swallowing must be coordinated with the other's willingness to present the breast or bottle. We are born into a situation of relatedness and are dependent on it for our survival (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

(Stern, 1977, 1985) has gathered evidence of shared expectations in the gazing, vocalizing, and touching of early mother-infant interactions. When the mother violates the infant's expectations by presenting the baby with a still face, the infant uses his or her wordless repertoire of sounds and actions to demand the resumption of the expected dialogue (Cohen & Tronick, 1983; Stern, 1985; Tronick, Als, & Brazelton, 1977). There is also evidence of shared affect in the reciprocal interchanges of mothers and their infants

(Stern, 1985). Similarities are found across different communicative modalities (like vocalizations and body movements) in the pitch, intensity, duration, and rhythm of both mother-initiated and baby-initiated interactions (Brazelton, 1982; Stern, 1985).

So given this early evidence of shared experience, can we conclude that there is no private experience and no intersubjective gap? I think the answer is no. That early experience can be shared in nonlinguistic modalities may guarantee intersubjective experience, but this does not guarantee that we will understand each other's wants or, at another level, each other's speech or concepts.

As language develops, the potential for shared meaning is extended but not in a way that guarantees the identity of meanings, as Mead would have it. What is said cannot capture all that is desired by the speaker (Lacan, 1977). Anyone who has attempted to communicate with an infant just learning to speak knows that they can only be understood if accompanied by a mother-translator who can tell you that "ju" means "juice" or "Judy" or "teddy" or whatever. But even the translator is not always successful in deciphering the infant's vocalizations. Moreover, overcoming the frustrations of not being understood is not merely a problem of learning to how articulate or when to use what words correctly. Language develops in the context of social interactions. The meanings of words need to be negotiated (Stern, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962). The first language system is a quasi-private, mother-baby language. As the child's social network expands, his or her verbal expressions continue to develop new meanings.

An example comes from a young women who described to me the process of her recovery from the private understandings she held about death. Her own decision to live followed her hospitalization for a suicide attempt. When asked what about that experience made a difference she said:

> In groups we talked about death. I was brought up thinking it was OK, it was just nothing, like it wasn't a sin to die. But we were all talking about it. After, when I looked in the mirror, I thought if I had killed myself, I wouldn't be there at that moment. Death was final. I would not be there. And I decided I was worth more than that.

It is neither the referents nor the dictionary concepts that words represent that change as we get older. It is what we understand by those concepts and referents.

We are born dependent for our lives on a world of interpersonal relations. As we expand our social networks, new worlds open up to us. The reciprocal, affective interchanges seen in the infant's relations continue in the intimate relations of adulthood. The struggle to express ourselves, and with others, to co-interpret and co-construct the meanings of our expressive acts also continues. We isolate and attempt to represent parts of our own experiences in our utterances, using the language we have grown into. In this ongoing process, many things work against our mutual understanding: Each person focuses on whatever is salient within his or her own extensive experiences and the open world stands against the narrowing grasp of our attention (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

The language we use to communicate is negotiated in the context of our private social networks. It carries with it both the marks of our private desires and the possibilities inherent in its own independent historical and cultural evolution (see Leadbeater, in press).

> Language does not always disclose the truth of a person: There is incompleteness in language as in every other means of communication; subjects themselves are not always aware of their own depth; subjects are always in a process of development and therefore no communication can be exhaustive (Barral, 1982, p.168).

What seems necessary to a theory of the development of shared meanings is a starting point that acknowledges both shared and private experience. The study of the processes of intersubjectivity is the investigation of the processes by which we recurrently succeed and fail to bridge the gap between subjectivities. As researchers, we need to be clear about the modality of shared experience that we are investigating - be it sensory, affective, linguistic, social, or intellectual. We need to explicate the starting points of our theorizing. We also need to tolerate a developmental end point in which meanings are shared, while the idiosyncrasy of private experience is not abolished. The possibility of shared meaning is located in an ongoing struggle of expression and interpretation between subjects in a world open to revealing itself to our experience.

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Author Notes

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